



Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
4600 Giant Springs Road
Great Falls, MT 59405

January 26, 2015

Dear Interested Party:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) has developed a draft Environmental Assessment (EA) prepared for the proposed action of a grazing lease renewal on the Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area (WMA). The 3,080 acre WMA is located approximately 20 miles west of Choteau along the Rocky Mountain Front occupying land in Teton County. The proposed grazing leases would allow cattle to be utilized as a management tool to remove residual vegetation and improve vegetative condition, thus enhancing the availability and quality of native forage benefiting wildlife on the WMA. The WMA has been grazed with a rest-rotation grazing system since 1991.

The EA is available at www.fwp.mt.gov – “Submit Public Comments”. If you would like to request a printed version of the EA contact the Region 4 FWP Office at (406) 454-5840. Questions and comments on the EA will be accepted through March 2, 2015.

Written comment can be mailed to the following address:

Ear Mtn. WMA Grazing EA Comments
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
PO Box 488
Fairfield, MT 59436

Or email comments to: blonner@mt.gov

Thank you for your interest on this project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Graham Taylor", with a stylized flourish at the end.

Graham Taylor
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
Region 4 Wildlife Manager
Great Falls, MT

Draft Environmental Assessment

Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area Grazing Lease

PART I. PROPOSED ACTION DESCRIPTION

1. Type of proposed state action:

Region 4 of Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks (FWP) proposes to continue a rest-rotation grazing system for cattle on Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area (WMA). Ear Mountain WMA (3080 acres) is currently divided into two pastures (north and south – Figure 1) in which two different lessees have been permitted to graze cattle in accordance with grazing lease stipulations outlined below. The proposed action would follow previous grazing lease terms and conditions.

2. Agency authority for the proposed action:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks will be the agency authority for the proposed action. The Montana Code Annotated (MCA) authorizes FWP to acquire and operate land and to enter into leases: *The department may develop, operate, and maintain acquired lands or waters: . . . (b) as land or water suitable for game, bird, fish, or fur-bearing animal restoration, propagation, or protection* (§ 87-1-209(2), MCA). *The department is authorized to enter into leases of land under its control in exchange for services to be provided by the lessee on the leased land* (§ 87-1-209(7), MCA). In addition, in accordance with the Montana Environmental Policy Act, FWP is required to assess the impacts that any proposal or project might have on the natural and human environments.

3. Name of project:

Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area Grazing Lease Agreement.

4. Name, address and phone number of project sponsor (if other than the agency):

Montana Fish, Wildlife, & Parks, Region 4, PO Box 488, Fairfield, MT 59436 (406-467-2488), Attn: Brent Lonner

5. Anticipated Schedule:

Public Comment Period: January 26 – March 2, 2015.

Decision Notice: March 9, 2015

FWP Commission: Final Consideration: April 9, 2015

Lease Begins: June 1, 2015 (South Pasture);
August 1, 2015 (North Pasture)

Leases Ends: December 31, 2017

Term of each Lease: 3 years

Grazing Schedule for each lease:

South Pasture – June 1-30, 2015; August 1-31, 2016; Rest, 2017

North Pasture – August 1-31, 2015; Rest – 2016, June 1-30, 2017

6. Location affected by proposed action (county, range and township):

The proposed project is located on the Ear Mountain WMA within Teton County, approximately 20 miles west of Choteau. The proposed grazing leases divides the WMA into two pastures (North pasture – 960 acres; South pasture – 2,120 acres) and have been in place since 1991 (South Pasture) and 1992 (North Pasture). Legal descriptions of each pasture are as follows:

Table 1. Legal Description - North Pasture

Teton County	
Township, Range	Section
T 24N, R 8W	S 4: SW1/4SE1/4; S1/2SW1/4
T 24N, R 8W	S 5: SE1/4SW1/4; S1/2SE1/4
T 24N, R 8W	S 8: E1/2NW1/4; NE1/4; N1/2SE1/4; SE1/4SE1/4 and portions north of the existing fence line in SW1/4SE1/4, SE1/4SW1/4 and NE1/4SW1/4
T 24N, R 8W	S 9: W1/2

Table 2. Legal Description - South Pasture

Teton County	
Township, Range	Section
T 24N, R 8W	S 7: Lot 3 (NW ¼ SW ¼), Lot 4 (SW ¼ SW ¼), E ½ SW ¼, SE ¼
T 24N, R 8W	S 8: That portion that lies south of the existing fence line between the NW corner of government lot 1 in section 17 and the SE corner of the SW ¼ NW ¼ of said section 8.
T 24N, R 8W	S 17: Lot 1 (NE ¼ NE ¼), Lot 2 (SE ¼ NE ¼), Lot 3 (NE ¼ SE ¼), Lot 4 (SE ¼ SE ¼), W ½ E ½, W ½
T 24N, R 8W	S 18: E ½, E ½ NW ¼
T 24N, R 8W	S 19: E ½ NE ¼, NE ¼ SE ¼
T 24N, R 8W	S 20: Lot 1 (NE ¼ NE ¼), Lot 2 (NW ¼ NE ¼), Lot 3 (NE ¼ NW ¼), Lot 4 (SE ¼ NW ¼), Lot 5 (SW ¼ NE ¼), Lot 6 (SE ¼ NE ¼), Lot 7 (NE ¼ SW ¼), Lot 8 (SE ¼ SW ¼), W ½ W ½

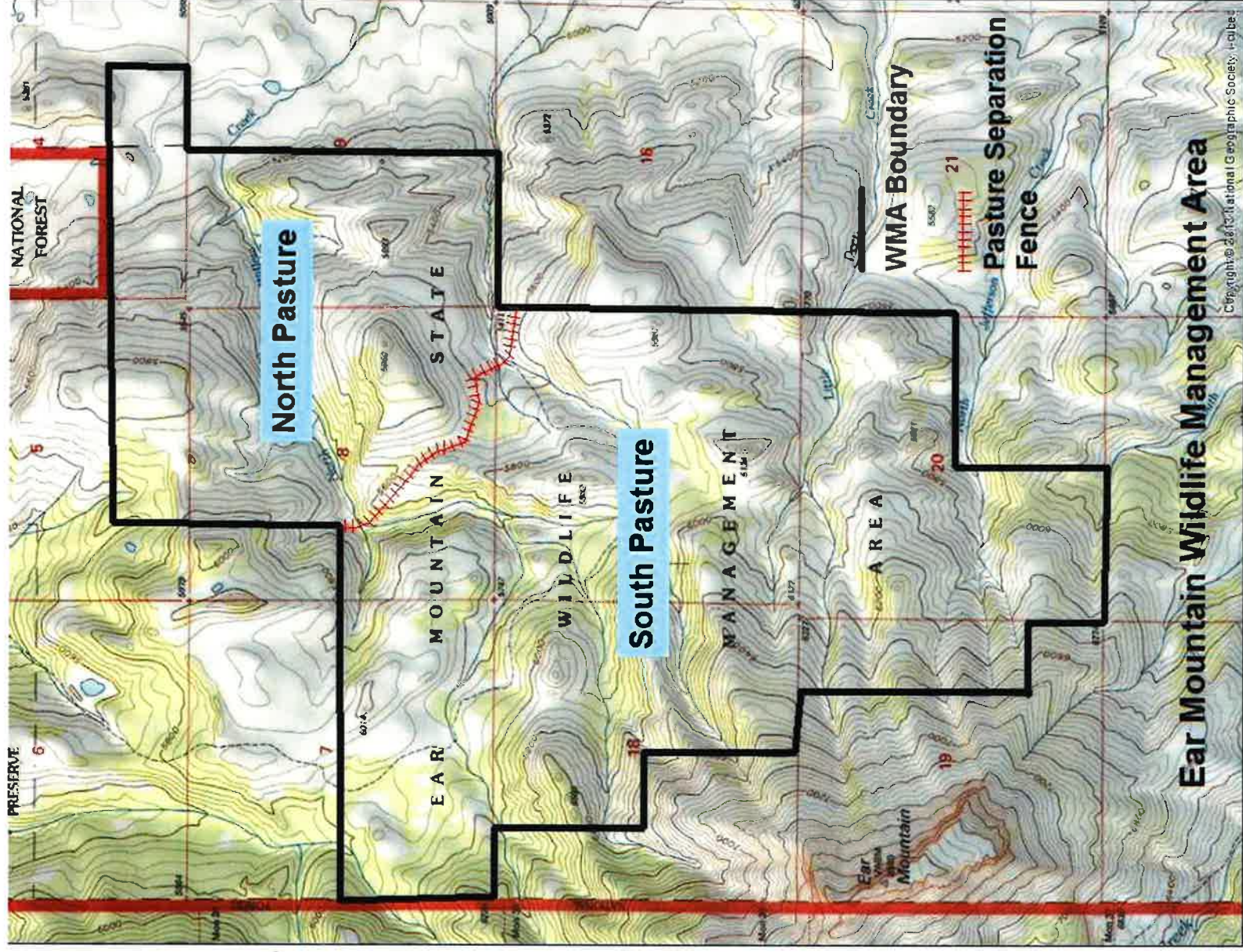


Figure 1. Topographic map portraying Ear Mountain WMA and associated grazing pastures.

7. Project size -- estimate the number of acres that would be directly affected that are currently:

	<u>Acres</u>		<u>Acres</u>
(a) Developed:		(d) Floodplain	<u>0</u>
Residential	<u>0</u>		
Industrial	<u>0</u>	(e) Productive:	
(existing shop area)		Irrigated cropland	<u>0</u>
(b) Open Space/	<u>0</u>	Dry cropland	<u>0</u>
Woodlands/Recreation		Forestry	<u>930</u>
(c) Wetlands/Riparian	<u>90</u>	Rangeland	<u>1730</u>
Areas		Other	<u>310</u>

8. Listing of any other Local, State or Federal agency that has overlapping or additional jurisdiction.

(a) **Permits:** None required

(b) **Funding:**

Fencing – As part of the agreement, routine fence maintenance will be carried out by the lessee's and FWP personnel. If necessary, Fish, Wildlife & Parks will provide materials for fence repairs. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will pay lessees at the hourly rate of \$10.00 for time spent on fence maintenance. When the grazing rental payment is due from the lessee to FWP, the total cost of maintenance through each lessee (number of hours worked as well as any necessary materials provided) will be subtracted from the payment. Fence maintenance costs through the lessee will not exceed \$500.00. The lessee will provide written documentation of maintenance performed to include date(s), hours worked, work description and location. Fish, Wildlife & Parks does not anticipate significant fence maintenance since most existing fences on the WMA are in good condition.

Rental Payment – The FWP grazing rate (cost/animal unit month) will be based upon the average annual grazing fees for Montana as reported by the National Agriculture Statistics Service in their annual report. For reference, the 2014 FWP grazing rate was \$21.00/AUM.

(c) **Other Overlapping or Additional Jurisdictional Responsibilities:**
None

8. Narrative summary of the proposed action or project including the benefits and purpose of the proposed action:

Lying along the east slope of the Rocky Mountain Front in northwest Montana, the WMA was purchased in 1976 by the Montana Department of Fish & Game to provide habitat for wildlife and public access to adjacent Federal lands. The WMA is very diverse topographically (Figure 1). Much of the landform, especially in the North Pasture, consists of steep slopes. Sparsely timbered slopes with patches of limber pine (*Pinus flexilis*) characterize the eastern edge of the WMA.

The WMA is managed for productive, diverse plant communities that will provide the quality forage and cover for native wildlife species, with emphasis on spring, fall and winter range habitat for mule deer and bighorn sheep. Utilizing a three year rest/rotation grazing cycle as a management tool is directed at helping to maintain the vigor of vegetation on the WMA for the benefit of wildlife. Limited rest/rotation grazing also provides opportunity for adjacent livestock operations for good cattle grazing pasture. Year-round and seasonal forage for mule deer and bighorn sheep and other big game will be maintained.

Prior to acquisition from FWP in 1976, livestock grazing on the land was the length of the growing season, continuous from year to year. From 1976-1991 the WMA was not used as livestock (cattle) grazing pasture in order to allow vegetation reestablishment due to excessive use prior to acquisition. In 1991, a rest-rotation grazing system was established for the 2,120-acre south pasture in order to address several sites on the WMA that portrayed limited vegetative cover due to wind and erosion along with accumulation of decadent material for bunchgrass species such as rough fescue (*Festuca scabrella*) (FWP, 1995). The intent of the grazing system was to increase vegetative cover while improving the vigor and production of bunchgrass stands on the area (FWP, 1995). Due to the same concerns, a grazing system was established for the 960-acre north pasture in 1992.

Both pastures have traditionally followed a rest-rotation pattern to a varying degree with the adoption of the current system coming from an evaluation of the system and vegetation in 1999 and 2000 (Frisina and Kujala, 1999; Frisina and Kujala, 2001). The current system prescribes to grazing one month before seed ripe the first year (June), one month after seed ripe the following year (August) and a year of complete rest the third year. Based on Frisina and Kujala's (1999, 2001) findings and in order to reduce browsing intensity, browsing frequency, and increase the frequency of season-long rest treatments, cattle stocking rates were reduced beginning in 2000 for the south pasture from a maximum of 650 to 391 animal unit months (AUMs) per one-month grazing period. The north pasture stocking rate was reduced from an average stocking rate of 219 AUMs to a maximum of 70 AUMs beginning in 2001 for each one-month grazing period. The latter stocking rates have remained at this level since this time. For further information on the Frisina and Kujala (1999, 2001) documents or to request a copy of these documents refer to Part V. (EA Preparation) of this EA.

Based on more limited recent vegetation monitoring surveys and photo comparison (summer/fall 2009 and summer 2014) browse plants surveyed (Aspen, *Populus tremuloides*; and Bebb's Willow, *Salix bebbiana*) continue to show overall good vegetative productivity with limited effects of over browsing due to livestock grazing on at least those areas monitored. Although not quantifiable data, visual inspection (anecdotal observations and photo comparison) of the WMA continues to portray overall good browse plant and native grass production (Appendix C). Further habitat analysis and monitoring will be completed during the proposed 2015-2017 lease period.

If approved, Beginning in 2015 and with respect to previous grazing periods, the south pasture would be scheduled to be grazed June 1 – June 30 at not more than 391 AUMs and the north pasture from August 1 – August 31 and not more than 70 AUMs. The grazing rate (cost/animal unit month) will be based on the average annual grazing fees for Montana as reported by the Montana Department of Agriculture in their annual report.

The proposed grazing plan for each pasture would be effective for three years, with contract renewal and/or modifications contingent on future management goals on WMA. See Appendix A and B for the complete proposed grazing plan.

As part of the proposed action, the lessees will allow public hunting with permission on their property for the duration of the lease agreement. Public access to portions of their properties at certain times of the year may be denied due to the presence of livestock or other ranch activities that might inhibit normal ranching operations. The lessees will regulate hunter numbers and timing and distribution of hunters on a first come, first served basis. Hunting will be allowed by permission only.

9. Description and analysis of reasonable alternatives (including the no action alternative) to the proposed action whenever alternatives are reasonably available and prudent to consider and a discussion of how the alternatives would be implemented:

Alternative A: No Action

- Fish, Wildlife & Parks would not utilize the proposed grazing management plan on the WMA. Over time, forage quality for big game species will decline.
- The lessee's would be required to find additional grazing pasture elsewhere.
- Hunting access on the lessee's properties may not be available to the public.

Alternative B: Proposed Action

- Fish, Wildlife & Parks would implement the described 3-year rest/rotation grazing cycle on the WMA.
- The establishment and maintenance of the proposed grazing plan would continue to use cattle grazing as a management tool to maintain plant productivity by stimulating regrowth and palatability of native grasses and forbs for the benefit of wildlife.
- The lessee(s) would benefit from the availability of additional early and late summer pasture for their cattle. A cooperative grazing system would promote and continue good relations with local ranchers/neighbors.
- Some segments of the public may disapprove of cattle grazing on the WMA.
- Public hunting opportunity would be allowed through the Salmond and Gollehon properties via permission and first come, first serve basis.

PART II. ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW CHECKLIST

1. Evaluation of the impacts of the Proposed Action including secondary and cumulative impacts on the Physical and Human Environment.

A. PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT

1. <u>LAND RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. **Soil instability or changes in geologic substructure?			X		No	1a
b. Disruption, displacement, erosion, compaction, moisture loss, or over-covering of soil, which would reduce productivity or fertility?			X		No	1b
c. **Destruction, covering or modification of any unique geologic or physical features?		X				
d. Changes in siltation, deposition or erosion patterns that may modify the channel of a river or stream or the bed or shore of a lake?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to earthquakes, landslides, ground failure, or other natural hazard?		X				
f. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Land Resources (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

1a and 1b. Cattle usage (up to 461 total AUM's) and the short grazing period will cause some measurable damage primarily where cattle develop trail systems and concentrate around water. However, stocking levels prescribed in the proposed action are substantially reduced from historic levels which helps minimize damage.

* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

*** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

**** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

2. <u>AIR</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. **Emission of air pollutants or deterioration of ambient air quality? (Also see 13 (c).)		X				
b. Creation of objectionable odors?			X		No	2a
c. Alteration of air movement, moisture, or temperature patterns or any change in climate, either locally or regionally?		X				
d. Adverse effects on vegetation, including crops, due to increased emissions of pollutants?		X				
e. ***For P-R/D-J projects, will the project result in any discharge, which will conflict with federal or state air quality regs? (Also see 2a.)		X				
f. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Air Resources (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

2a. The proposed action would have no effect on the ambient air quality, however, some individuals may find the smell of livestock grazing on the WMA objectionable.

* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

*** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

**** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

3. WATER Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. *Discharge into surface water or any alteration of surface water quality including but not limited to temperature, dissolved oxygen or turbidity?		X				
b. Changes in drainage patterns or the rate and amount of surface runoff?		X				
c. Alteration of the course or magnitude of floodwater or other flows?		X				
d. Changes in the amount of surface water in any water body or creation of a new water body?		X				
e. Exposure of people or property to water related hazards such as flooding?		X				
f. Changes in the quality of groundwater?		X				
g. Changes in the quantity of groundwater?		X				
h. Increase in risk of contamination of surface or groundwater?			X		No	3a
i. Effects on any existing water right or reservation?		X				
j. Effects on other water users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quality?			X		Yes	3b
k. Effects on other users as a result of any alteration in surface or groundwater quantity?		X				
l. ****For P-R/D-J, will the project affect a designated floodplain? (Also see 3c.)		X				
m. ***For P-R/D-J, will the project result in any discharge that will affect federal or state water quality regulations? (Also see 3a.)		X				
n. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Water Resources (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

3a and 3b. Presence of cattle grazing in/around riparian zones such as creek bottoms may result in some localized water quality concerns. At least during the grazing period, water users may need to take added caution in drinking water before the water is purified. However, water users should ideally be taking the necessary precautions anyway due to the existing potential of naturally occurring water based pathogens (i.e., Giardia).

* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

*** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

**** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

4. VEGETATION Will the proposed action result in?	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Changes in the diversity, productivity or abundance of plant species (including trees, shrubs, grass, crops, and aquatic plants)?			X		No	4a
b. Alteration of a plant community?			X		No	4b
c. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
d. Reduction in acreage or productivity of any agricultural land?		X				
e. Establishment or spread of noxious weeds?		X			Yes	4e
f. ****For P-R/D-J, will the project affect wetlands, or prime and unique farmland?		X				
g. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Vegetation (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

4a/b. The grazing system is designed to increase productivity and abundance of most grass species located on the WMA. Some loss in grass biomass will occur as a result of grazing treatments. The current stocking rates have resulted in maintaining more residual grass cover. Seasonal deferment and yearlong rest also provide habitats free of grazing over time.

4e. Currently, there are established clusters of spotted knapweed and leafy spurge on the acreage included within the grazing plan. The grazing system is intended to enhance native plant productivity, which helps reduce weed infestations. The timing of early grazing coincides with the palatability of emerging weeds, which may also help reduce their vigor. In addition, FWP will continue to manage existing noxious weed infestations on its properties per the guidance of the 2008 FWP Integrated Noxious Weeds Management Plan.

* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

*** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

**** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

** 5. FISH/WILDLIFE Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Deterioration of critical fish or wildlife habitat?		X				
b. Changes in the diversity or abundance of game animals or bird species?			X		No	5b
c. Changes in the diversity or abundance of nongame species?		X				
d. Introduction of new species into an area?		X				
e. Creation of a barrier to the migration or movement of animals?			X		Yes	5e
f. Adverse effects on any unique, rare, threatened, or endangered species?		X				
g. Increase in conditions that stress wildlife populations or limit abundance (including harassment, legal or illegal harvest or other human activity)?			X		No	5g
h. ****For P-R/D-J, will the project be performed in any area in which T&E species are present, and will the project affect any T&E species or their habitat? (Also see 5f.)			X		No	5h
i. ***For P-R/D-J, will the project introduce or export any species not presently or historically occurring in the receiving location? (Also see 5d.)		X				
j. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Fish and Wildlife:

5b. The grazing system anticipates maintenance of the quality habitat for wildlife.

5e. Perimeter and interior fences are already established for this pasture system. To mitigate their impact, wildlife friendly fence designs have been employed so that wildlife can either pass above or below barbed wire strands.

5g. Some resident game and nongame species, to include mule deer, black and grizzly bear, elk, mountain grouse and small mammals could be affected by cattle presence and congestion for a limited time. These species may avoid the heavy use areas, but should return to the area when cattle presence is diminished.

5h. Grizzly bears are present on and around the WMA during the spring, summer, and fall periods. Grizzly bear presence is recognized by the cooperating landowners involved with these proposed actions. Livestock distribution is monitored and assessed to avoid direct conflict with these bears. In the event a conflict occurs, all measures will be made to favor the continued presence grizzly bears on the WMA.

* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

*** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

**** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

B. HUMAN ENVIRONMENT

6. <u>NOISE/ELECTRICAL EFFECTS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Increases in existing noise levels?		X				
b. Exposure of people to serve or nuisance noise levels?		X				
c. Creation of electrostatic or electromagnetic effects that could be detrimental to human health or property?		X				
d. Interference with radio or television reception and operation?		X				
e. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Noise/Electrical Effects (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

- * Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.
- ** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).
- *** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.
- **** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

7. LAND USE Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of or interference with the productivity or profitability of the existing land use of an area?		X				7a
b. Conflicted with a designated natural area or area of unusual scientific or educational importance?		X				
c. Conflict with any existing land use whose presence would constrain or potentially prohibit the proposed action?		X				7c
d. Adverse effects on or relocation of residences?		X				
e. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Land Use (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

7a/c. Grazing activity would occur outside the time frame of pertinent big game or game bird hunting seasons that could be associated with this habitat.

- * Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.
- ** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).
- *** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.
- **** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

8. <u>RISK/HEALTH HAZARDS</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Risk of an explosion or release of hazardous substances (including, but not limited to oil, pesticides, chemicals, or radiation) in the event of an accident or other forms of disruption?		X				
b. Affect an existing emergency response or emergency evacuation plan, or create a need for a new plan?		X				
c. Creation of any human health hazard or potential hazard?			X			8c
d. ***For P-R/D-J, will any chemical toxicants be used? (Also see 8a)		X				
e. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Risk/Health Hazards (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

8c. Chemical spraying is part of FWP's integrated weed management program to manage noxious weeds. Certified professionals will utilize permitted chemicals in accordance with product labels and as provided for under state law.

* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

*** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

**** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

9. COMMUNITY IMPACT Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of the location, distribution, density, or growth rate of the human population of an area?		X				
b. Alteration of the social structure of a community?		X				
c. Alteration of the level or distribution of employment or community or personal income?		X				
d. Changes in industrial or commercial activity?		X				
e. Increased traffic hazards or effects on existing transportation facilities or patterns of movement of people and goods?		X				
f. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Community Impact (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

- * Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.
- ** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).
- *** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.
- **** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

10. <u>PUBLIC SERVICES/TAXES/UTILITIES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Will the proposed action have an effect upon or result in a need for new or altered governmental services in any of the following areas: fire or police protection, schools, parks/recreational facilities, roads or other public maintenance, water supply, sewer or septic systems, solid waste disposal, health, or other governmental services? If any, specify:		X				
b. Will the proposed action have an effect upon the local or state tax base and revenues?		X				
c. Will the proposed action result in a need for new facilities or substantial alterations of any of the following utilities: electric power, natural gas, other fuel supply or distribution systems, or communications?		X				
d. Will the proposed action result in increased use of any energy source?		X				
e. **Define projected revenue sources			X			10e
f. **Define projected maintenance costs.			X			10f
g. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Public Services/Taxes/Utilities (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

10e. The grazing rate (cost/animal unit month) will be based on the average annual grazing fees for Montana as reported by the National Agricultural Statistics Service in their annual report. The exact amount will depend upon the number of AUM's grazed X the annual grazing rate. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will be paid at this rate through each lessee (minus reimbursement to lessee for fence maintenance).

10f. Fish, Wildlife & Parks anticipates minimal maintenance costs for existing fences. Any future maintenance costs will be absorbed into the regular operation and maintenance accounts for the WMA.

* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

*** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

**** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

** 11. AESTHETICS/RECREATION Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Alteration of any scenic vista or creation of an aesthetically offensive site or effect that is open to public view?			X		No	11a
b. Alteration of the aesthetic character of a community or neighborhood?		X				
c. **Alteration of the quality or quantity of recreational/tourism opportunities and settings? (Attach Tourism Report.)		X				
d. ***For P-R/D-J, will any designated or proposed wild or scenic rivers, trails or wilderness areas be impacted? (Also see 11a, 11c.)		X				
e. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Aesthetics/Recreation (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

11a. Historically these pastures have been grazed by cattle. Cattle will be present for short periods of time two out of the three years during the lease agreement. The WMA is located in a rural setting and the presence of cattle will not be something new for the public. The grazing plan is designed so that no cattle will be present on the WMA after the beginning of September so there are no concerns related to hunter activity and cattle presence.

* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

*** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

**** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

12. <u>CULTURAL/HISTORICAL RESOURCES</u> Will the proposed action result in:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. **Destruction or alteration of any site, structure or object of prehistoric historic, or paleontological importance?		X				
b. Physical change that would affect unique cultural values?		X				
c. Effects on existing religious or sacred uses of a site or area?		X				
d. **** <u>For P-R/D-J</u> , will the project affect historic or cultural resources? Attach SHPO letter of clearance. (Also see 12.a.)		X				
e. Other:						

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Cultural/Historical Resources
(attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

- * Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.
- ** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).
- *** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.
- **** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

SIGNIFICANCE CRITERIA

13. <u>SUMMARY EVALUATION OF SIGNIFICANCE</u> Will the proposed action, considered as a whole:	IMPACT *					
	Unknown	None	Minor	Potentially Significant	Can Impact Be Mitigated	Comment Index
a. Have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable? (A project or program may result in impacts on two or more separate resources that create a significant effect when considered together or in total.)		X				
b. Involve potential risks or adverse effects, which are uncertain but extremely hazardous if they were to occur?		X				
c. Potentially conflict with the substantive requirements of any local, state, or federal law, regulation, standard or formal plan?		X				
d. Establish a precedent or likelihood that future actions with significant environmental impacts will be proposed?		X				
e. Generate substantial debate or controversy about the nature of the impacts that would be created?		X				
f. ***For P-R/D-J, is the project expected to have organized opposition or generate substantial public controversy? (Also see 13e.)		X				
g. ****For P-R/D-J, list any federal or state permits required.		X				

Narrative Description and Evaluation of the Cumulative and Secondary Effects on Significance Criteria (attach additional pages of narrative if needed):

The proposed project will not conflict with any local, state, or federal regulations. Furthermore, no substantial controversy or public debate is expected by continuation of the grazing plan since no adverse effects are anticipated and the grazing will benefit the WMA and local wildlife populations and their habitat.

2. Evaluation and listing of mitigation, stipulation, or other control measures enforceable by the agency or another government agency:

A grazing lease signed by both parties will be the guiding document for the duration of the grazing plan on the WMA. The lease will be valid for 3 years. Fish, Wildlife and Parks will continue to monitor vegetative quality and quantity on both pastures throughout this time period and at the end of the 3-year period a decision will be made to either continue as is or modify the existing grazing plan based on vegetative conditions.

* Include a narrative explanation under Part III describing the scope and level of impact. If the impact is unknown, explain why the unknown impact has not or cannot be evaluated.

** Include a narrative description addressing the items identified in 12.8.604-1a (ARM).

*** Determine whether the described impact may result and respond on the checklist. Describe any minor or potentially significant impacts.

**** Include a discussion about the issue in the EA narrative and include documentation if it will be useful.

PART III. NARRATIVE EVALUATION AND COMMENT

The proposed grazing management plan between FWP and the Salmond and Gollehon Ranches will lend toward maintaining productive habitat conditions on Ear Mtn. WMA. Livestock will be used in a limited 3-year rest-rotation grazing system to maintain and/or improve vegetative conditions for wildlife.

The components of this project will not have significant impacts on the physical environment (i.e. geological features, fish and wildlife, and water resources) or the human environment (i.e. land use, recreation, and utilities). Most impacts identified in the previous pages are minor and are of short duration. Anticipated long-term consequences from the completion of the grazing plan will be improved range conditions for wildlife.

PART IV. PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

1. Public Involvement:

The public will be notified in the following manners to comment on this current EA, the proposed action and alternatives:

- Two public notices in each of these papers: *Choteau Acantha*, *Fairfield Sun Times*, and *the Great Falls Tribune*.
- One statewide press release;
- Public notice on the Fish, Wildlife & Parks web page: <http://fwp.mt.gov>.

Copies of this environmental assessment will be distributed to the neighboring landowners and interested parties to ensure their knowledge of the proposed project.

This level of public notice and participation is appropriate for a project of this scope having limited impacts, many of which can be mitigated.

2. Duration of comment period:

The public comment period will extend for (30) thirty days. Written comments will be accepted until 5:00 p.m., March 2, 2015 and can be mailed to the address below:

Ear Mtn. WMA Grazing Lease
Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
PO Box 488
Fairfield, MT 59436

Or email at: blonner@mt.gov

PART V. EA PREPARATION

1. Based on the significance criteria evaluated in this EA, is an EIS required? (YES/NO)? No.

If an EIS is not required, explain why the EA is the appropriate level of analysis for this proposed action.

Based upon the above assessment, which has identified a limited number of minor impacts from the proposed action, it has been determined that no significant impacts to the physical and human environment will result due to the proposed action alternative. It has also been determined that no significant public controversy will incur over the proposed action alternative. Therefore, an EIS is not required and an environmental assessment is the appropriate level of review.

2. Name, title, address and phone number of the person(s) responsible for preparing the EA:

Brent Lonner, FWP Area Wildlife Biologist
PO Box 488
Fairfield, MT 59436
406-467-2488

3. List of agencies consulted during preparation of the EA:

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks: Wildlife Division

Literature Cited:

Frisina, M.R. and Q. Kujala. 1999. South pasture-Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area livestock grazing analysis. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Helena, MT.

Frisina, M.R. and Q. Kujala. 2001. North pasture-Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area livestock grazing analysis. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Helena, MT.

Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks. 1995. Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area grazing lease No. 4073. Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks, Region 4, Great Falls; 9 pages.

List of Appendices:

- A. South pasture grazing plan
- B. North pasture grazing plan
- C. Photo analysis comparisons of vegetation production
- D. Salmond Ranch proposed hunting access terms
- E. Gollehon Ranch proposed hunting access terms

APPENDIX A

South Pasture Grazing Plan

For the 2015 grazing season, the south pasture (see Figure 1) shall be open to not more than 391 AUMs from June 1, 2015 through June 30, 2015. Only cattle may be grazed on this pasture. Fence maintenance prior to cattle entry and while cattle are present will be the responsibility of the lessee. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will provide necessary materials for maintenance. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will pay lessees at the hourly rate of \$10.00 for time spent on fence maintenance. Salt or mineral is the responsibility of the lessee at approved sites. The grazing rate (cost/AUM) will be based upon the average annual grazing fees for Montana as reported by the National Agriculture Statistics Service in their annual report. A single annual payment shall be made to the Department no later than November 1, 2015. The total cost of maintenance through each lessee (number of hours worked times hourly rate) will be subtracted from the payment. The lessee will need to provide written documentation of maintenance performed to include date(s), hours worked, work description and location. Fence maintenance costs through the lessee will not exceed \$500.00.

For the 2016 grazing season, the south pasture (see Figure 1) shall be open to not more than 391 AUMs from August 1, 2016 through August 31, 2016. Only cattle may be grazed on this pasture. Fence maintenance prior to cattle entry and while cattle are present will be the responsibility of the lessee. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will provide necessary materials for maintenance. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will pay lessees at the hourly rate of \$10.00 for time spent on fence maintenance. Salt or mineral is the responsibility of the lessee at approved sites. The grazing rate (cost/AUM) will be based upon the average annual grazing fees for Montana as reported by the National Agriculture Statistics Service in their annual report. A single annual payment shall be made to the Department no later than November 1, 2016. The total cost of maintenance through each lessee (number of hours worked times hourly rate) will be subtracted from the payment. The lessee will need to provide written documentation of maintenance performed to include date(s), hours worked, work description and location. Fence maintenance costs through the lessee will not exceed \$500.00.

Browse and herbaceous forage conditions will be assessed after the 2015 and 2016 grazing seasons. Any adjustments to the grazing prescription will be made at that time. As part of the grazing pasture/rotation pattern, no grazing shall occur during 2017.

These grazing schemes (for the years 2015, 2016 and 2017) conform to conclusions and prescriptions in the March 1999 "South Pasture-Ear Mountain WMA Livestock Grazing Analysis" by Frisina and Kujala.

Appendix B

North Pasture Grazing Plan

For the 2015 grazing season, the north pasture (see Figure 1) shall be open to not more than 70 AUMs from August 1, 2015 through August 31, 2015. Only cattle may be grazed on this pasture.

Fence maintenance prior to cattle entry and while cattle are present will be the responsibility of the lessee. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will provide necessary materials for maintenance. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will pay lessees at the hourly rate of \$10.00 for time spent on fence maintenance. Salt or mineral is the responsibility of the lessee at approved sites. The grazing rate (cost/AUM) will be based upon the average annual grazing fees for Montana as reported by the National Agricultural Statistics Service in their annual report. A single annual payment shall be made to the Department no later than November 1, 2015. The total cost of maintenance through each lessee (number of hours worked times hourly rate) will be subtracted from the payment. The lessee will need to provide written documentation of maintenance performed to include date(s), hours worked, work description and location. Fence maintenance costs through the lessee will not exceed \$500.00.

For the 2016 grazing season and as part of the grazing pasture/rotation pattern, the north pasture (see Figure 1) shall be rested and no grazing shall occur.

For the 2017 grazing season, the north pasture (Figure 1) shall be open to not more than 70 AUMs from June 1, 2017 through June 30, 2017. Only cattle may be grazed on this pasture. Fence maintenance prior to cattle entry and while cattle are present will be the responsibility of the lessee. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will provide necessary materials for maintenance. Fish, Wildlife & Parks will pay lessees at the hourly rate of \$10.00 for time spent on fence maintenance. Salt or mineral is the responsibility of the lessee at approved sites. The grazing rate (cost/AUM) will be based upon the average annual grazing fees for Montana as reported by the National Agriculture Statistics Service in their annual report. A single annual payment shall be made to the Department no later than November 1, 2017. The total cost of maintenance through each lessee (number of hours worked times hourly rate) will be subtracted from the payment. The lessee will need to provide written documentation of maintenance performed to include date(s), hours worked, work description and location. Fence maintenance costs through the lessee will not exceed \$500.00.

Browse and herbaceous forage conditions will be assessed after the 2015 and 2017 grazing seasons. Any adjustments to the grazing prescription will be made at that time.

These grazing schemes (for the years 2015, 2016 and 2017) conform to conclusions and prescriptions in the July 2001 "North Pasture-Ear Mountain WMA Livestock Grazing Analysis" by Frisina and Kujala.

Appendix C

Photo analysis comparisons from 3 photo points on Ear Mtn. WMA (1998 – 2014).



Unknown Date, 1998

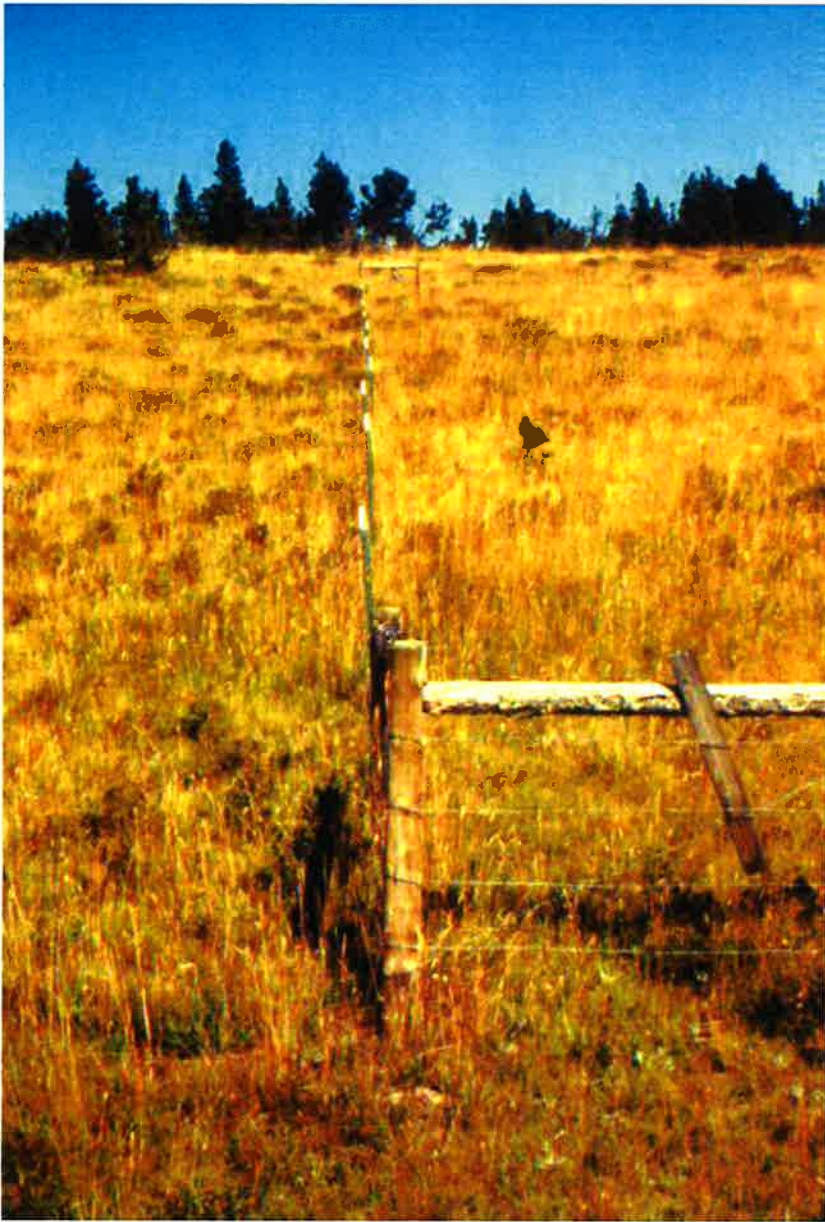


August 31, 2009

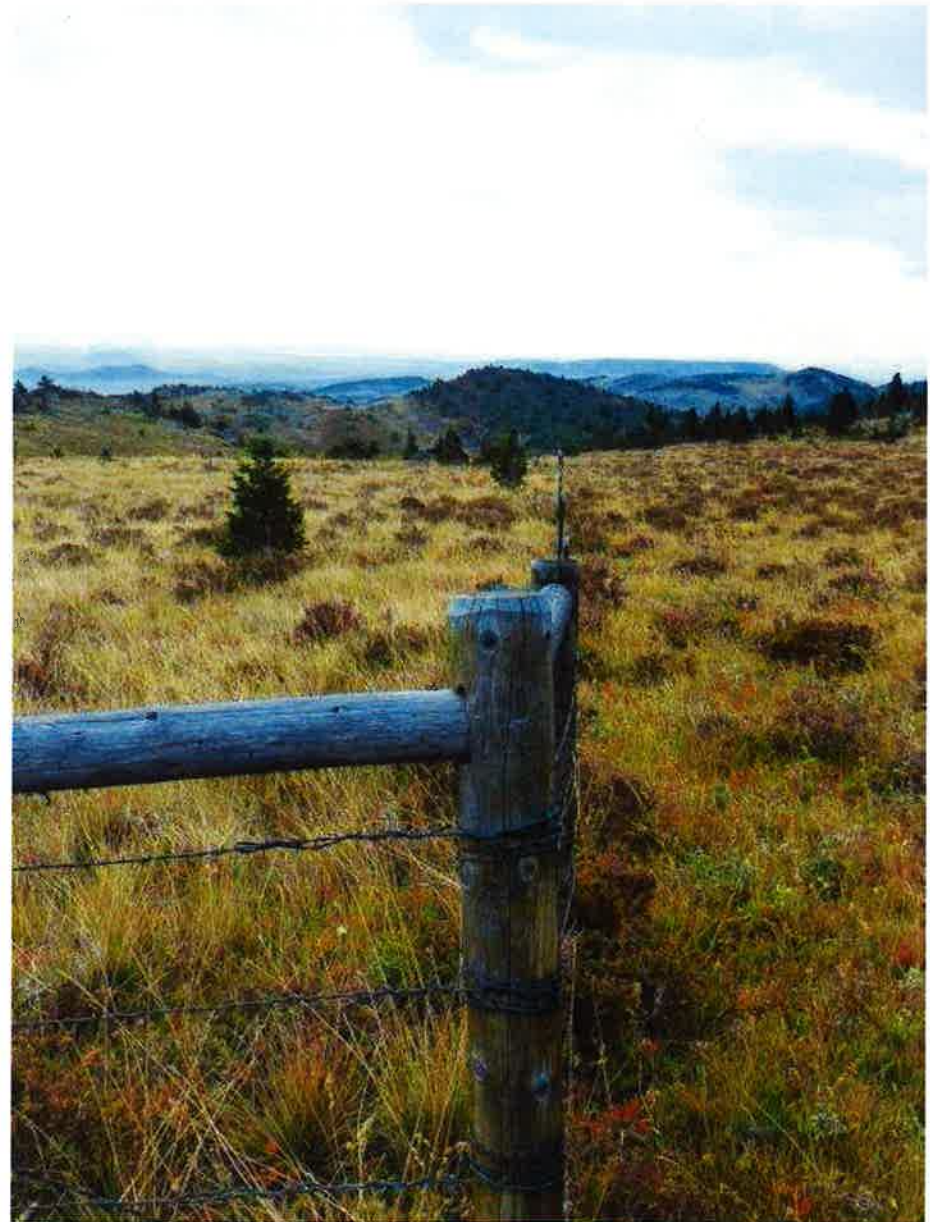


September 23, 2014

Aspen stand in the south pasture. Some of the older, mature aspen trees appear to be thinning out and good productivity of young aspen suckers are being produced.



1998 (looking north)



September 23, 2014 (looking south)

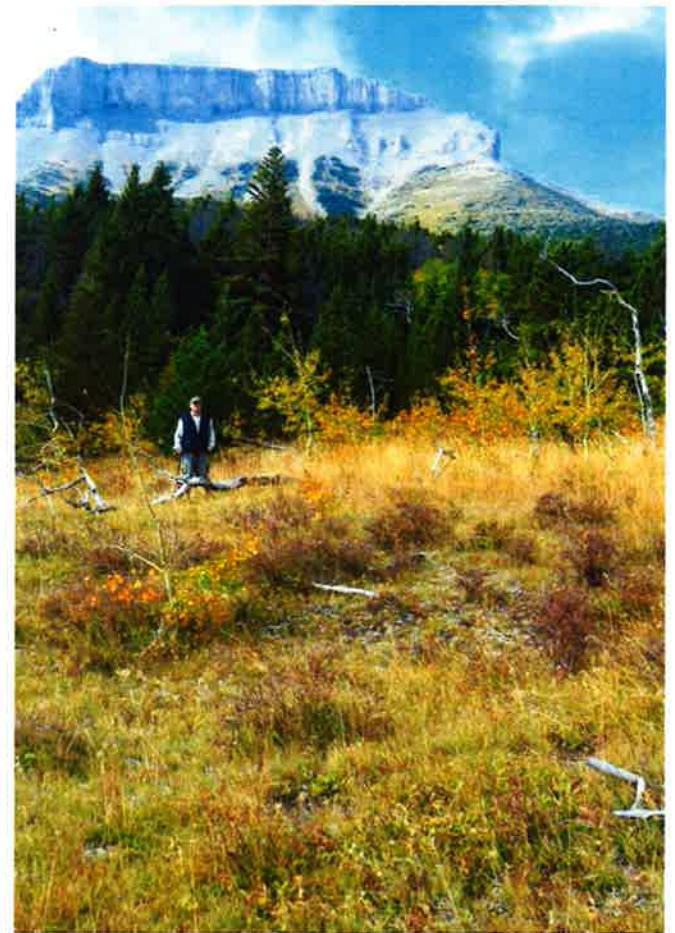
Vegetation exclosure in the south pasture. Unfortunately, the 1998 photo was not along during the 2014 trip, and by memory only - the wrong angle was taken. Note the growth of the conifer inside.



Unknown date, 1998



August 31, 2009



September 23, 2014

Aspen and conifer stand located in the south pasture on Ear Mtn. WMA. The dead douglass fir trees shown in the 2009 photo are due to beetle kill. Estimates of beetle killed trees on the WMA are approximately 10%.

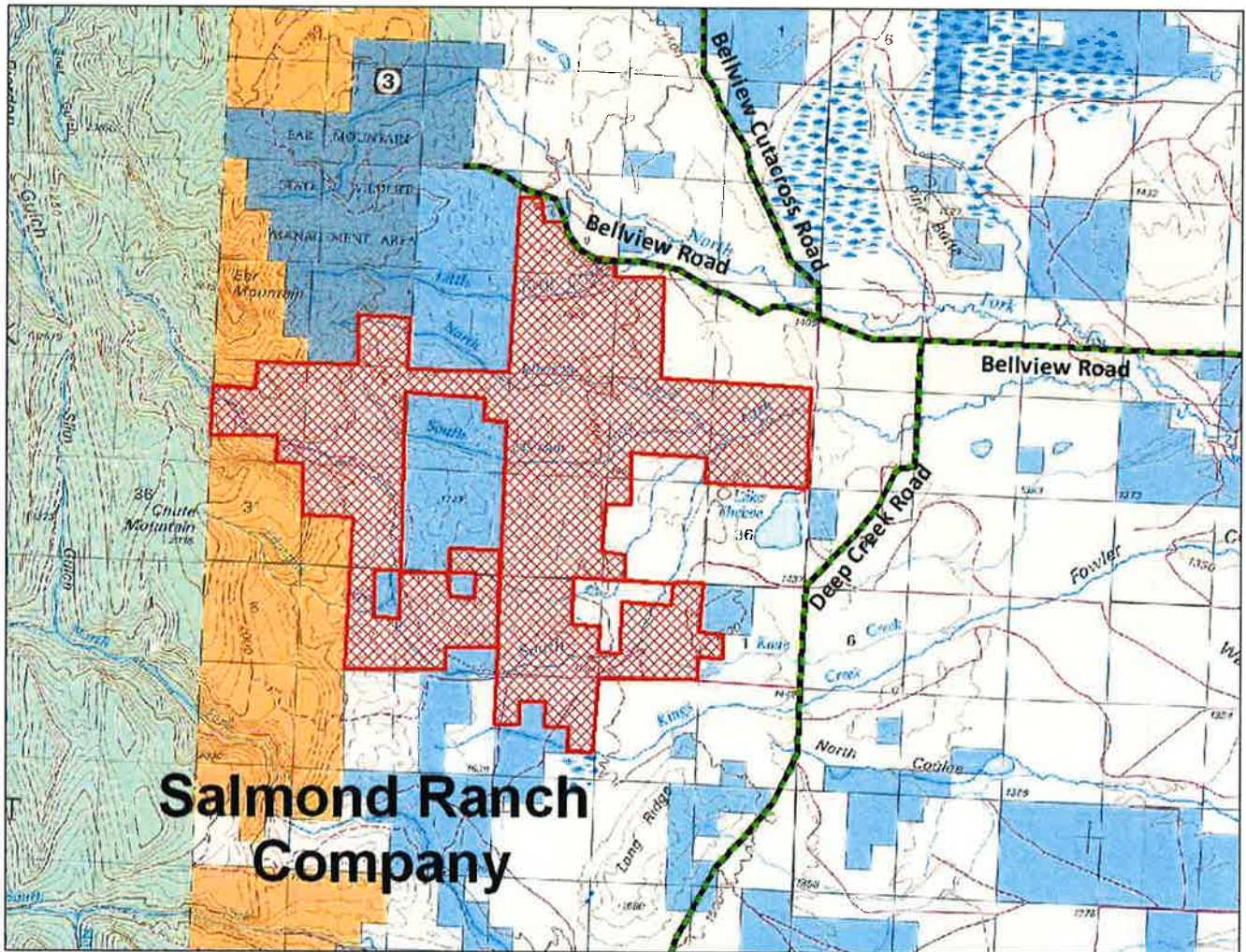
Appendix D

The Salmond Ranch agrees to allow public hunting access to their property as a condition of the grazing lease on the Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area. The lease term is June 1, 2015 through December 31, 2017.

Public access by foot or horseback with permission (either written or oral) is currently allowed from roads or trails as designated by the Salmond Ranch from September 1 through the end of the fall hunting season. Most hunting currently occurs later in the season due to wildlife accessibility and presence. Bird hunting on the property is limited. This program will continue throughout the lease term.

Public access to portions of the Ranch at certain times of the year may be denied due to presence of livestock in pastures or other activities that might inhibit a normal livestock ranching operation. The Salmond Ranch will regulate hunter numbers and timing and distribution of hunters on a first-come, first-served basis. Hunting will be allowed by permission only. The lessee will need to provide FWP a written record of hunting access provided to include at least hunter name(s), date(s) and species hunted.

A map of the Salmond Ranch Company addressed by these public hunting access terms is included here as part of Appendix D.



Appendix E

The Gollehon Ranch agrees to allow public hunting access to their property as a condition of the grazing lease on the Ear Mountain Wildlife Management Area. The lease term is August 1, 2015 through December 31, 2017.

Public access by foot or horseback with permission (either written or oral) is currently allowed from roads or trails as designated by the Gollehon Ranch from September 1 through the end of the fall hunting season. This program will continue throughout the lease term.

Public access to portions of the Ranch at certain times of the year may be denied due to presence of livestock in pastures or other activities that might inhibit a normal livestock ranching operation. The Gollehon Ranch will regulate hunter numbers and timing and distribution of hunters on a first-come, first-served basis. Hunting will be allowed by permission only. The lessee will need to provide FWP a written record of hunting access provided to include at least hunter name(s), date(s) and species hunted.

A map of the Gollehon Ranch addressed by these public hunting access terms is included here as part of Appendix E.

